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The reading development of six preschool children who learned to read at home without systematic instruction was studied in depth using the case study method. The main objective of the study was to ascertain (1) if there was an identifiable process by which these children learned to read and (2) the role of the parents in these children's early reading acquisition. Findings indicate an evolving process of reading acquisition for each subject; a strong similarity in the process of reading acquisition across subjects; development taking place across several sequential steps or stages; and the influence of parents in developing children's reading ability, although their help seemed to be mostly spontaneous, intuitive, and unplanned. Based on findings, a model is proposed that describes possible stages in the reading development of preschool children who learn to read without systematic instruction. (Author/RH)

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READING ACQUISITION OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN WITHOUT SYSTEMATIC INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

The reading development of six preschool children who learned to read at home without systematic instruction was studied in depth using the case study method. The main objective of the study was to find out: (1) if there was an identifiable process by which these children learned to read, and (2) what was the role of the parents in these children's early reading acquisition.

The findings indicate: (1) An evolving process of reading acquisition for each subject. (2) A strong similarity in the process of reading acquisition across subjects. (3) The reading development of the six children appeared to involve several sequential steps or stages. (4) The parents were instrumental in developing the reading ability of the children, although their help seemed to be mostly spontaneous, intuitive and unplanned.

Based on findings of this study, a model is proposed that describes possible stages in the reading development of preschool children who learn to read without systematic instruction.

With the growing interest in early reading since the 1960's a substantial amount of literature has been published on the subject. This literature represents viewpoints of different disciplines from anthropology, linguistics and sociology, to psychology and education. From an educator's and child development point of interest the literature describes to a large extent, characteristics of early readers and their home environment (Durkin 1966, 1984; Clark 1976; Plessas and Oaks 1964; Briggs and Elkind 1973, 1977; Salzer 1984; Torrey 1969), particular methods of reading instruction and how the child progressed through these (Terman 1918; Fowler 1962; Krippner 1963; Doman 1964; Evans 1965; Soderbergh 1977;), or, explorations of what children know about print and reading before formal schooloing begins (Ylisto 1967; Mason 1980, 1982; Robeck 1983; Pinson 1982; Baghban 1984). Very little has been published about the process of reading acquisition of early readers, who by all accounts, were not systematically taught to read; though this seems to be changing with the recent growth of interest in the topic. Can the informal process of reading acquisition of these children be identified? If so, are there any identifiable similarities in the reading development of these early readers?

Ylisto (1967) suggests that children's initial responses to print originate from their natural environment. She felt that the reading process consists of sequential steps beginning with an awareness of print in the environment, and proceeding to identification of words in social contexts (i.e. names on store fronts), and then to identification of words in a written language context.

Chomsky (1971), believes that there is a relationship between learning to read and writing. That a child's invented spelling may be helpful in his or her reading acquisition by providing interesting reading material

for practice. Schickedanz (1978) proposes that beginning readers go through an important memorization period of familiar stories when they ask for the same stories to be read to them over and over again. The ability to memorize stories "by heart", then "by sight" leads the child to observe letter sound correspondence, she says.

Mason (1980) suggests that there is a natural hierarchy of knowledge development in learning to read words that is based on three levels: First children realize that letters are discriminable patterns, then that letters provide clues for reading, and then that sounds in words are determined by letters.

In her account of the reading development of her own son, Lass (1982, 1983) describes the reading skills that the preschool boy acquired over a period of three years. These skills, which reportedly were never systematically taught to him, include, letter identification, sight vocabulary, interest in making words, and participation in the parents' reading.

While these few studies may provide some insight into skills involved in the reading acquisition process of early readers who were not systematically taught to read, there is nothing in the literature that provides or suggests a comprehensive view of that process. The present investigation attempted to find out: 1) if there is an identifiable process by which an early reader learns to read when no systematic method of instruction is utilized; and, 2) what is the role of the parents in children's early reading acquisition. Insight into these topics may provide a better understanding of mechanisms involved in the reading acquisition process and thus it may give pointers for reading instruction in general. Insight into the

parents' role in that process may encourage parents to create a home environment that will facilitate reading acquisition. It may also reduce parental apprehension about how much they should or should not support their child's desire to learn to read. And finally, it may bring about a greater degree of cooperation between the parents and the schools.

METHOD

The Subjects*

A retrospective viewpoint was adapted for this study. This seems to be the most practical methodology to gain insight into a developmental process that takes place in only a few subjects in a given population. A progressive approach could not be used since we would have had to observe hundreds of children (if not more) who show interest in beginning reading skills in order to hopefully find a few that would turn out later to be early readers. This same problem has faced Benjamin Bloom in his research on the development of talent. In his recent book DEVELOPING TALENT IN YOUNG CHILDREN (1985) Bloom says "at this point we know of no method by which one could predict which young children (under the age of ten) would eventually become outstanding" (p. 6). He too chose, therefore, the retrospective-interview approach for his study.

Six early readers were selected for the study, three boys and three girls. The subjects were brought to the attention of the investigator by the Early Childhood Research Center of the University at Buffalo. Since the research was retrospective in nature an attempt was made to locate the youngest readers available so that early events would be more likely to be

*For the complete case studies see ref. 1. Only a very short description of the children is reported here.

recalled. The subjects ranged in age from 2 years 9 months to 4 years 10 months at the start of the study. Their identification was done by a three-step procedure: 1. Parental nomination of the child as reader; 2. Parental statement that the child learned to read without systematic instruction; 3. Assessment of the child's ability to read unfamiliar material. The subjects had to show an ability to read aloud six simple sentences of 3 - 5 words in length, and miscall no more than 3 of the 24 words. These sentences which describe common events in the life of a young child were especially prepared for the identification purpose at the Early Childhood Research Center.

While all the children who were selected for the study passed the reading criterion of the six sentences, it must be noted that a wide range was evident in their reading ability. This was found out in a later test. While the youngest subject bareley made the criteria for inclusion in the study, two subjects could read from any picture book with only a few mistakes, two read at second grade level, and the sixth child had the technical ability to read almost any source.

Family Background

The six children came from varied middle class backgrounds. Their fathers' professional occupations included a firefighter, glassworker, computer analyst, music teacher, doctoral candidate in economics, and a university professor. The mothers were full time mothers except for one who was a full time career woman who kept a daylong babysitter at home. The six families were intact. The subjects were all first born. Five of the children had a younger sibling, the mother of the sixth child was expecting twins. Five subjects were Caucasian; one was of Chinese background. Four subjects had nursery school experience, the two youngest children were still at home most

of the time. The parents' ages at the time of the subjects' birth were: 23/23, 42/29, 29/27, 29/26, 34/34, 34/33. This appears to place them in a somewhat older age group than the average parents of first-born preschool children. All six children acquired their reading skills essentially at home, before they started going to nursery school.

Instruments for Data Collection and Procedure

Since the subjects learned to read at home, each set of parents was viewed as the natural observers of their child and his or her reading development. The role of the investigator was to draw from the parents any facts, recollections and insights that they had regarding the child's reading acquisition. These data were obtained by a series of several lengthy interviews (similar to the retrospective-interview tactic used in Bloom's study) that were held with each set of parents. Though the bulk of the data was collected from the mothers, because they had more time to spend with the investigator, all the fathers had a chance to provide their input. These interviews were conducted either at home or on campus, whichever was more convenient for the parents on the particular day, and spanned on the average over 10 hours per couple. To increase the validity of the collection of data two strategies were used during these interview sessions:

1. First, an open-ended unstructured interview was conducted. Each set of parents was asked to describe in their own words their view of how their child learned to read, and what they thought was the sequence of that child's reading development. The investigator recorded the parents' comments and observations without making any remarks.

2. To ensure a more complete recollection and collection of data a second series of interviews was held. These interviews were more structured in nature and were based on an orally administered questionnaire. The long and detailed questionnaire was carefully designed to elicit from the parents answers to the researcher's specific questions. As Guba and Lincoln (1981) write: the interview is "an attempt to reach the non normative; the person who has a singular view because of his experience, position, or insight; the respondent with special information; and/or the interviewee who is central to a situation or otherwise holds a unique position" (p. 157). These questions were grouped in several categories such as: family background, description of the subject, play experiences, television habits, preschool experience, reading related activities and materials, progression of reading behavior, and parental attitudes towards reading.

This study, as all other studies based on interviews and questionnaires, has the underlying assumption that data provided by parents are reasonably reliable. Since no one could tell at the time of data collection what direction the results would take, and since there was nothing embarassing in the questionnaire, there was no particular reason for the parents to provide other than reasonably honest answers. To help themselves with their recollections, they often associated recalled events with birthdays, holidays, trips, particular books or toys, and other memorable occasions and objects in their and their child's life.

A psychologist gave each subject the STANFORD BINET IQ TEST to obtain a measure of the child's general ability, and the PEABODY PICTURE VOCABULARY TEST to get an estimate of the child's receptive verbal ability.

Once all data were collected, they were organized for each subject under 3 major sections that included: a narrative description of the child; a chronicled description of his or her progression of reading behavior; and summary tables. These tables were crucial for the identification of several key findings since patterns could be observed only after the data were condensed. Once the analysis of the reading development of each child was completed and the role of the parents identified, a comparison across subjects was carried out in an attempt to find general patterns.

FINDINGS

The Reading Acquisition Process

The chronological progression of each child's reading behavior was condensed into a table, one for each child, that listed all entries describing the emerging reading behaviors of that child. The analysis of that table indicated that each of the six children went through what appears to be an evolving process of reading acquisition. Data indicate that this process was sequentially based on several steps or learning stages; each of which was characterized by a distinct reading behavior. It appears that each of these stages, which lasted for several months, was a prerequisite for the following stage, a necessary step without which the following step could not have come into existence. The distinct reading behavior, however, of each of these stages did not end with the onset of the succeeding stage, but continued to develop, while the new behavior evolved. Following is a summary of the steps, or stages that were identified in the reading behavior of each of the six subjects. This summary is presented in the form of a table (Table 1), and the steps with their emphasized reading behavior can be compared across subjects.

Table 1 -- THE STAGES

Stage		starting age
	VICTOR -- AGE 2 YEARS 9 MONTHS	
1	Preliminary period of gaining knowledge of books/print	8 months
2	Identifying letters & acquiring sight vocabulary	18 months
3	Learning the sounds of letters	26 months
4	Putting words together	27 months
5	Reading familiar books with parents' help	29 months
6	Sounding out unfamiliar words	32 months
7	Reading unfamiliar picture books	34 months
	SEAN-- AGE 4 YEARS 4 MONTHS	
1	Preliminary period of gaining knowledge of books/print	6 months
2	Interest in letters, beginning sight vocabulary	18 months
3	Making words, learning sounds of letters	24 months
4	Reading to parents from familiar books	30 months
5	Sounding out short unfamiliar words	34 months
6	Reading easy unfamiliar books	34 months
	MARK -- AGE 4 YEARS 4 MONTHS	
1	Preliminary period of gaining awareness of books/print	1 month
2	Beginning letter knowledge and a sight vocabulary	12 months
3	Learning the sounds of the letters	16 months
4	Beginning to put simple words together	18 months
5	Participating in parents' readings to him	24 monhts
6	Reading a simple book by himself	36 months
7	Enjoying reading for content	48 months
	JANICE -- 4 YEARS OLD	
1	Preliminary period of gaining knowledge of books/print	12 months
2	Acquiring letter knowledge, beginning sight vocabulary	18 months
3	Taking active role in mother's readings	24 months
4	Learning sounds of letters	24 months
5	Putting words together	30 months
6	Ability to read easy unfamiliar books	36 months
7	Reading for enjoyment of content	48 months
	BETTY -- AGE 2 YEARS 11 MONTHS	
1	Preliminary period of gaining awareness of books/print	3 months
2	Identifying letters/acquiring sight vocabulary	14 months
3	Beginning "reading" to parents	20 months
4	Learning sounds of letters	25 months
5	Interest in spelling and printing words	32 months
6	Sounding out unfamiliar words	34 months
	MARNA -- 4 YEARS 10 MONTHS	
1	Preliminary period of gaining awareness of books/print	day 1
2	Acquiring sight vocabulary and letter knowledge	12-15 months
3	Learning sounds of letters	25 months
4	Making words	30 months
5	Reading an unfamiliar book	36 months
6	Reading for enjoyment of content	58 months

As can be seen from the table between 6 to 7 stages were identified in the reading acquisition process of each of the six subjects. Each of these stages was characterized by a distinct reading behavior which was of central interest to the child at that time. It was exciting to find out that these stages appear to be similar across the six subjects and that they followed a remarkably similar sequence.

First, there was a preliminary period for each of the six subjects in which they gained awareness and general knowledge about books and print. That period included, such things as interest in picture books and magazines, turning of pages, parents' daily readings, watching television commercials and "Sesame Street", and playing with magnetic letters and letter blocks. This period started for the six children any time during the first year of life and lasted until somewhere around the age of 12 to 18 months.

By that time, all six subjects began a second phase in their reading development in which they acquired letter knowledge and a beginning sight vocabulary; they learned to identify and name the letters, while at the same time learning to recognize whole words. Data show that four out of the six subjects acquired their letter knowledge in parallel to their sight vocabulary. One child was taught the names of the letters several months before showing any interest in them or in words. Once he began to be interested in letters his sight vocabulary started to develop alongside. The sixth subject started to acquire sight vocabulary some three months before she was helped with letter identification. On the average, this phase of acquiring letter knowledge with a beginning sight vocabulary lasted about six months.

Once the subjects had the basic knowledge of the letters and some sight vocabulary, they began showing interest in a new reading skill. They became

sensitive to and interested in the sounds of the letters. A.B.C. books, alphabet letters and a variety of invented sound games were used by the parents as aids in this third phase of the children's reading acquisition. Five of the six children reportedly started earning the sounds of the letters around the age of 24 to 25 months. One subject started learning the sounds at the age of 16 months. Five of the children focused on learning the sounds for a period of several months before moving to the next phase. One subject learned the sounds at the same time that he began entering the following stage, according to the parents account.

It appears from the data that once the children knew the names of the letters and their sounds, and had a beginning sight vocabulary they were ready to enter a new phase in their reading development. They started to focus on "making words". According to the parents' account, the children were constantly interested at that time in putting words together with their favorite letters. They would use plastic letters, letter blocks, or letter cards, and put together words on the refrigerator, on the floor, in the sand, or any other imaginable place. Each of the six subjects reportedly went through this phase with a starting age ranging from 18 to 32 months.

Following the period when their interest was centered on making words, data indicate that the three male subjects started to read aloud from familiar books. They enjoyed reading to their parents, or would "assist" them when they read to them by reading the words they could recognize. Two of the girls started to read aloud from memory before entering the period of making words. No data were rovided on the sixth child regarding this point.

Once they had a fair amount of practice in forming words and some practice in reading aloud to their parents, it appears from the data that the

subjects moved on to a new stage in their reading development. Three subjects (2 boys and 1 girl) reportedly began a period of several months during which they were interested in sounding out short unfamiliar words. Before that phase, they used to ask a parent for help whenever they would come across an unfamiliar word. However, now they would try to tackle the word on their own and sound it out by themselves. This phase occured at ages 32 to 34 months.

The interest in sounding out unfamiliar words was not specifically mentioned by the parents of the other three subjects. This, does not necessarily mean that it did not take place, however. The parents of these three children did report that around the age of 36 months their children started to read by themselves from new unfamiliar books. It seems reasonable to assume that the ability to read unfamiliar books includes the skill of sounding out unfamiliar words. Thus it is possible that also these children went through a sounding out phase which passed by unnoticed by the parents or they may have forgotten to mention it. All four subjects who were past the age of 36 months at the time of data collection were reported to have been able to read unfamiliar books at that age. Interestingly, the data suggest that their reading was motivated at that age by a desire to master the technical skill of reading. Only around age four, according to several parents' account, has a change occurred in their child's reading behavior when he or she began to read for the enjoyment of content rather than for mastery of the technical skill alone.

The Role of the Parents

What was the role of the parents in these children's reading development? Data indicate that it was crucial. Although 11 of the 12 parents reported that they never intended to teach their child to read, and four of the six couples appeared to sincerely believe that their child learned to read early, primarily, because of his or her innate ability, findings indicate that all these parents did spend a great deal of time interacting with their child around reading related activities--from an early age. Moreover, they appeared to have truly enjoyed these interactions; as one mother related: "Some parents build sand castles with their children, we made words with him."

Data clearly show how these parents helped the subjects learn the names of the letters, playing for hours letter games and reading repeatedly from alphabet books. For example, "show me an 'A', show me a 'B', and so on, or, "what letter could you change that would make a new word?" were common games described by the parents. They spontaneously and playfully coached their child on an ever growing sight vocabulary during walks or trips to the shopping mall, using street signs, store names, direction words and captions in magazines, as teaching aids. "Where are we now Marna?" one couple used to ask their child while pointing to the store name and answering for her "we are at TWIN FAIR, or "we are at K-MART," etc. They eagerly helped their child with spelling attempts, and encouraged his or her efforts in "making words" on the refrigerator, on the floor, in the sand, or on a sheet of paper. They read daily books to and with the child often pointing at each word, and with much patience and enthusiasm listened to the children read aloud to them. They also enjoyed making rhymes with words, as for example: "what rhymes with mommy?" one of the mothers used to ask, and her son's favorite response would be "salami." A sample list of the parents' activities and the frequency in which they were reported is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Parents' reading activities

with the children

type of activity	frequency of report
Daily readings with pointing at the words	6/6
Showing words in magazines	2/6
Teaching names of letters	6/6
Teaching sight vocabulary	5/6
Making rhymes with words	5/6
Playing letter games	6/6
Helping learn sounds of the letters	6/6
Helping with putting words together	6/6
Playing spelling games	6/6
Playing add-a-letter games	1/6
Listening to child read aloud	5/6
Having child read after parent	1/6
Doing alternate reading	2/6
Working on sounding out words	2/6
Providing books on an appropriate level	3/6
Helping with workbooks	5/6

The parents made much use of "Sesame Street" television program, picture books, children's dictionaries, commerical workbooks, and a large assortment of reading toys, as for example the various alphabet letters, flash cards, electronic games, and more.

They related that whenever they would introduce a new book, a toy, or a reading activity to their child they used to take special care to match that book or toy's level of difficulty with the child's ability at the time. As one mother who used to select library books for her daughter explained: "She does not know what her level is and they are more appropriate for her." They tried their best to provide the child with a maximum amount of successful experiences through these reading materials in order to build up his or her confidence as well as enthusiasm for the reading activity. According to their account, the parents were sensitive to work with the child only when he or she showed interest. There were no set schedules and it appears that while the children were never pushed or pressured to learn any of the reading skills, they were often stimulated to do so.

It was not the case that these parents necessarily wanted their child to learn how to read early and therefore spent all that time with them. It appears that in these families, initially at least, the reading activities had another impetus quite different from that of learning to read, something unique to each family, which may have been the actual reason causing the parents to interact with their child around reading (to be discussed later). Once they began to interact with their child around the reading activities, the children reciprocated with eagerness. The parents then seemed intuitively to follow the child's learning interests and curiosity, and sensitively respond to his or her requests for aid at a corresponding level of difficulty.

One could say therefore, that the parents facilitated the child's natural course of development.

Summary of Findings

The major findings of this study can be summarized as follows:

1. An evolving process of reading acquisition was identified for each subject.
2. A strong similarity was found in the process of reading acquisition across subjects.
3. The reading development of the six children seemed to have followed a number of distinct stages.
4. The parents were found to be instrumental in their child's development of reading ability.
5. Although the parents' help apparently was mostly spontaneous, intuitive and unplanned, they did use a large variety of techniques to facilitate their child's reading development.
6. The parents appeared to truly enjoy the long interactions with their child around reading related activities.

The study yields a number of secondary findings that may also be of interest. Included among these are:

1. A simultaneous development of phonics and whole-word skills was found in the reading development of the six subjects.
2. "Sesame Street", reportedly, was influential in all six cases in acquiring letter knowledge, sight vocabulary, and phonics skills.
3. Five of the six subjects enjoyed working in commercial preschool workbooks, including dot-to-dot activities.
4. All the fathers participated in their child's reading development. Although four of the six mothers could devote to it more time, one father had a greater role in his son's reading development than the mother.

5. The score on the Stanford Binet Intelligence Scale was found to be far above average, 140 and 160, for two subjects; and just slightly above average, 113 and 115, for another two. Unusable results were obtained in the case of the Chinese dominant child, because of her limited English, and in the case of the subject who was only 2 years 9 months at the date of testing, because of his inability to sit still long enough for the test situation. The scores on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (in the same order) were: 153, 118, 113, 139.

DISCUSSION

The reading development of six preschool children who learned to read without systematic instruction was studied in depth. One can not talk in absolute terms on the basis of a sample of such small size. However, since the reading acquisition of the six children appeared to have followed such a natural, sequentially logical, and similar course of development one cannot dismiss this as simply coincidental. The fact that six preschool children of different backgrounds with varying IQs, learned to read without formal instruction following a remarkably similar process of development, is significant. It may suggest a more general trend, indicating perhaps the existence of a natural process taking place in the reading development of preschool children who grow up in a particluarly literate environment. By "natural" it is meant that this process was neither directed nor guided from outside the child by the parents or by some standard reading method, but rather, it appears that this process developed within each child by something internal to him or her, using the parents for the necessary feedback and support. It seems warranted therefore to combine the stages of the six subjects into a single set of stages, or steps, and offer it as a working hypothesis describing the learning process of early readers who learn to read when no systematic instruction is provided. Table 3 describes this process.

Table 3

Possible Stages in the Learning Process of Early Readers who are not Systematically Taught to read

Stage I - A preliminary period of gaining awareness and general knowledge of books and print (starting any time during the first year).

Stage II- Learning to identify and name the letters and acquire beginning sight vocabulary (starting around 12 - 18 months).

Stage III- Learning the sounds of the letters (starting around 20-24 months).

Stage IV - Putting together words (starting around 24-32 months).

Stage V - Active reading from familiar books (starting around 20-30 months).

Stage VI - Sounding out short unfamiliar words (starting around 32-34 months).

Stage VII- Reading easy unfamiliar books (around 36 months).

Stage VIII-Reading for enjoyment of content (around 48 months).

This model appears to have some support in existing literature. Chall (1979) for example, proposes that reading is a developmental process consisting of several stages rather than a single unitary phenomenon. Chomsky's (1971), suggestion that there is a relationship between learning to read and writing; and Durkin's (1966) finding that for over half of her early readers interest in learning to print developed prior to, or simultaneous with an interest in learning to read, are somewhat supportive of Stage IV in the model. Durkin's (1966) finding that among the parents of her early readers there were some who helped their children with the letter sounds, is supportive of Stage III in the model.

The greatest support of the model can be found in Lass' (1982, 1983) account of the reading development of her own son. Similarly to the parents in the present investigation she never made any plans to teach her son to read, but as she was professionaly interested in reading she was supportive of his reading behavior, and reports that a great deal of incidental teaching did take place. In her account of the boy's growth in reading skills, which was synthesized into several categories, one finds an early awareness of and interest in print, (Stage I in the model); a period from about the age of 17 to 22 months, in which he learned to identify the letters and acquired a beginning sight vocabulary (Stage II in the model). At 28 months he was making words with magnetic letters (Stage IV in the model). Lass reports that Jed learned the sounds of the letters from "Sesame Street" and in the family day care that he attended, displaying an ability to produce many letter sounds at 35 months (Stage III in the model). Active participation in reading was present at 29 months (Stage V in the model). At 33 months he was an independent reader able to read easy unfamiliar books that had 2 - 3 word

phrases and picture cues (Stage VII in the model). Although Lass had a different design and objective to her study from those of the present investigation and she recorded different and additional categories in her account of the reading behavior of her own son, the phases mentioned above are remarkably similar to the stages identified in the present investigation.

Although a growing number of preschoolers, reportedly, is learning how to read, the majority of children in this age group do not read. But if the model proposed above indicates, as is suggested, the evolvement of a natural process of reading development in children who grow up in a particularly literate environment, why is not that phenomenon more widespread? Or, to put it in different words, what could have made the environment of the six subjects "particularly literate" and conducive for an early reading acquisition in comparison to the environment of many other middle class children who are not early readers? As was stated earlier the parents of the subjects were found to have spend a great deal of time with these children on reading related activities. Durkin (1984) also found in her recent study that family members had a crucial role in the development of early reading skills. They too were supportive of the children and spent considerable time with them on reading related activities. But, what may be significant in the present investigation is the observation that in the participating families the reading activities appear to have had another impetus different from that of learning to read. It seems that in each of these families there was a unique situation which may have been the actual reason that caused the parents to interact with their child around reading.

For example, in the case of Victor, the parents related how reading activities were used by them at first, as a means to keeping the child physically calm. This requirement was imposed on them by the child's

pediatrician due to his asthmatic condition. Even though Victor had previously shown some casual interest in words and letters, it was only during a recuperation period following a hospitalization event that the parents began to provide him with intense reading related experiences in order to entertain him and keep him calm. And it was then that the process of his reading development really began, according to his parents.

In the case of Sean, it appears that his reading development became something of a hobby for his parents. "Some parents build sand castles with their children, we made words with him", his mother explained. Perhaps because the father completed his formal education with only a high school diploma (and has a very high appreciation for higher education), Sean's parents derived much satisfaction from their work with the child and from his early reading development. "Where did he get it from?" the mother quoted themselves as asking each other. They were impressed and reportedly amazed with every step of progress that their son had made; seemingly, much more so than the parents of the other five subjects.

As for Mark, the parents' fears may have been the driving force behind their special interest in and sensitivity toward reading. The father remarked on his concern that Mark would become a poor reader like his cousin unless he personally did something about it. The mother was worried that Mark would follow in her sister's steps, dropping out from school and "doing nothing" in spite of his talents, unless they did something specific about it.

In Marna's case, reading activities seem to have been the lifeline between the child and her parents who felt guilty about leaving her with a sitter so much of the time. Since she was a very tense and restless baby they also used to read a lot to her in order to calm her down. In addition, they

had another very personal reason to encourage Marna's reading development--"It was good to see that the child was not retarded", the mother explained in reference to her late pregnancy.

In the case of Betty, her early reading development seemed to have justified for the mother the resignation from her 12-year-long teaching career.

Janice is the only subject in this study whose mother ostensibly had planned to teach her to read in order to develop her mental ability. She believed, in fact, that it was the mother's responsibility to teach a preschooler to read. This case involved however, a family from a different culture, one which does not hesitsate to make intellectual demands on children from an early age. It was interesting therefore, to find out that although Janice's mother had planned to teach the child to read, her interactions with her were mostly intuitive, and Janice's reading development followed a similar course to that of the other subjects.

Thus one can see how in the homes of at least five of the six subjects there appeared to be a strong motive to focus on reading related activities beyond that of reaching a certain level of reading proficiency. This is important to note because such a home environment has probably reduced the element of "pressure" from the interactions between parent and child. There were no specific goals to meet. And indeed, while the parents did spend a great deal of time with the subjects around reading related activities these interactions were reported to be with little tension. The parents described the sessions as pleasant and fun filled. This is also evident from the fact that many rhymes and games were often used throughout the learning process. It is as if the child's final ability to read was almost a byproduct rather than an end goal.

Limitations

Every study has its limitations and this one is no exception. First among these, is the small size of the sample. A larger sample would have given the findings greater validity. However, an indepth case study, can not be done on a large sample. An attempt to significantly increase the size would have diminished the insight.

A second limitation of the study is its retrospective nature. Much of the data was based on memory skills of participating parents and that may vary from one set of parents to another. This limitation however, is offset by having "uncontaminated" subjects; the process of their reading development was never affected by this research or by its investigator.

A third and somewhat related limitation is the study's dependence on the parents' observation skills. These too may vary from one set of parents to another, but there is no way to circumvent that limitation.

Fourth, interviews and questionnaires, even if carried out in the most meticulous manner, are not absolutely objective instruments for data collection. An element of subjectivity is unavoidable both on behalf of the researcher as well as the parents. Still, these are two of the best instruments available for data collection in naturalistic studies.

Implications

Although early reading is viewed today with less apprehension than in earlier decades, elements of concern continue to exist also today--among parents as well as among teachers. "He (the early reader) is going to be bored in school", say some teachers. "Am I creating a problem by helping him learn to read"? ask some parents. This study showed how early reading can be

achieved at home in a natural, non pressured manner, with both parents and child enjoying the process. Parents who enjoy spending time with their preschool child and who derive satisfaction from the promotion of his or her mental growth can take heart from this study and feel free to interact with the child on reading related activities without fear of causing any harm--as long as the distinction is kept between pushing and encouraging. There is no indication in the extensive literature published on the topic, that early reading can be harmful to children, in particular when achieved at home in a warm relaxed manner.

Primary grade teachers need to be more supportive of parents who enjoy facilitating their child's reading development. As an increasing number of children enter school knowing how to read, teachers need to be prepared for them and be able to reassure parents that they will continue to develop the early reader's skills from whatever level he or she is at.

Schools must become more flexible with their schedules and be able to accommodate a six-year-old reader with a program of study that will facilitate the best social, emotional and academic development.

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